

VZCZCXRO6501
OO RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #1408/01 3650443
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 300443Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8940
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 5438
RUEHZS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001408

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR H AND EAP/MLS.

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [MARR](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: SENATOR WEBB'S DECEMBER 23-24 MEETINGS IN HANOI

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a wide-ranging set of meetings in Hanoi December 23-24, Senator Jim Webb emphasized the considerable progress made since he first re-engaged with Vietnam as a civilian in 1991. Speaking with officials from the National Assembly (NA), MFA and Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT); the Archbishop of Hanoi; local intellectuals; and U.S. businessmen, the Senator emphasized the need to continue to develop a relationship he described as one of the four most important in Asia. At the same time, the Senator stressed that true reconciliation must also embrace those in Vietnam's south, as well as in the diaspora, who had suffered after 1975. The Vietnamese side was well briefed, both on the Senator's personal history with Vietnam and on issues particular to Virginia, and spoke from common talking points on GSP, market economy status, and catfish exports. END SUMMARY.

Building a Bridge

¶2. (SBU) The consistent theme of Senator Jim Webb's December 23-24 meetings in Hanoi was the need to continue strengthening the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, which he characterized as one of the four most important in Asia. In separate discussions with VFM Pham Binh Minh, NA Vice Chairman Nguyen Duc Kien, NA Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Nguyen Van Son, and MOIT VM Do Huu Hao -- as well as in conversations with Vietnamese intellectuals at the Ambassador's residence December 23 and with the American Chamber of Commerce December 24 -- Senator Webb emphasized the impressive growth in U.S.-Vietnam ties in the years since the Senator first became re-engaged with the country as a business consultant, journalist, and war veteran in the early 1990s. Particularly striking, the Senator noted, were improvements in the business and investment climate, as well as efforts -- on both sides -- to heal the wounds of war.

¶3. (SBU) At the same time, Senator Webb emphasized candidly, as a longstanding friend of Vietnam, that true reconciliation would remain elusive as long as substantial elements of Vietnamese society in Vietnam's south, as well as in the diaspora, remained excluded. In making this point, the Senator noted that "bridges," while invaluable, are vulnerable to hostile fire from either side. In this vein, Senator Webb emphasized to National Assembly Vice Chair Kien the tremendous symbolic importance of his planned visits to the Ho Chi Minh City Martyrs Cemetery (for NLF and PAVN soldiers) and the Binh An Cemetery (for soldiers of the ARVN).

¶4. (SBU) The Senator's official interlocutors voiced general agreement and argued that attitudes were changing; VFM Minh noted, for example, that Vietnam's embassy in Washington was actively pursuing better relations with the Vietnamese community of Northern Virginia. The only discordant note was struck by NA Vice Chairman Kien, who complained about the activities of Vietnamese Americans critical of the GVN; however, Kien's remarks appeared almost perfunctory, and overall the tone of the Senator's visit was

extremely positive. VFM Minh urged the two sides to boost cooperation on education, while NA Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Son and his deputy, former UN Ambassador Ngo Quang Xuan, called for more legislative exchanges and support for the National Assembly's efforts to carve out a more robust law-making and oversight role. MOIT VM Hao urged closer collaboration on science and technology issues, particularly in the energy sector.

GSP, Market Economy Status, Catfish

¶ 15. (SBU) The Senator's official counterparts presented a closely coordinated message urging Senator Webb to support Vietnam's efforts to be granted GSP status. The most forceful advocate of the GVN position was MOIT VM Hao who expressed hope that a favorable decision could be reached before the end of the Bush Administration, as was discussed during PM Nguyen Tan Dung's June visit to Washington. VM Hao (and others) cited a letter his ministry had sent to the USTR detailing plans to revise Vietnam's labor laws by ¶ 2010. VM Hao and NA Vice Chairman Kien also made a strong push for Market Economy Status, arguing that such a move would help Vietnam in its efforts to redress its trade surplus with the United States. The Senator explained continuing U.S. concerns over labor standards, stressing that these were standards that the United States sought to apply universally, not just with Vietnam. The Ambassador urged Vietnam to consider a Presidential decree to cover the period until appropriate legislation could be passed.

¶ 16. (SBU) Moving to an issue of direct concern to the Senator's constituents, VM Hao, Chairman Kien, and VFM Minh urged Senator Webb to oppose efforts to reclassify certain types of Vietnamese fish, such as the basa, as catfish. Senator Webb responded that his primary concern was less with categorization than with food safety and inspection.

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Local Intellectuals: U.S. Elections and China

¶ 17. (SBU) While the Senator's GVN counterparts were generally circumspect about the change in U.S. administrations, intellectuals hosted by the Ambassador the evening of December 23 were more effusive. The former President of Hanoi University, Dr. Nguyen Xuan Vang, and Institute of Development Studies economist Le Dang Doanh expressed admiration for the U.S. electoral process and said they hoped that an Obama administration would remain engaged in Asia. Doanh, Vang, and the head of Hanoi Moi newspaper's foreign affair division, Nguyen Quoc Chinh, also voiced familiar concerns about China, in particular fears that Vietnam was becoming economically dependent on its northern neighbor.

AmCham Focuses on the U.S.

¶ 18. (SBU) At an American Chamber of Commerce breakfast December 24, members of the U.S. expatriate business community expressed concern that Vietnam, despite certain advantages, would be hit hard by the global financial crisis. Attention was primarily focused on the United States, however, with the Senator fielding tough questions on the Treasury Department's troubled assets relief program (TARP), the extension of TARP funds to U.S. automakers, and foreign policy priorities for the incoming Obama administration. Webb said that he has advised both President-Elect Obama and future Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that the United States should concentrate on strengthening its relationships with countries in the region besides China and listed Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand as potential key partners. Senator Webb noted that he was particularly heartened to see where the U.S.-Vietnam relationship is today.

A Moving Discussion with the Archbishop

¶ 19. (SBU) In his final official meeting, Senator Webb and his wife exchanged Christmas greetings with Hanoi Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet. (Note: The next morning, Senator Webb and his family attended

the Christmas service conducted by the Archbishop. End note.)
Archbishop Kiet eschewed more sensitive topics such as land disputes at the former residence of the Papal Nunciature and Thai Ha parishes, instead focusing on Pope Benedict's call for world peace and an end to poverty. Senator Webb's allusion to his work as a "bridge" between Vietnam and the United States, and the sensitivities this involves, appeared to resonate with the Archbishop, who himself has come under pressure from the Chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee. Noting that reconciliation was in harmony with the teachings of Catholicism, Archbishop Kiet expressed hope that divisions within Vietnamese society -- regional differences, political divisions, ethnic and religious tensions -- could be bridged and old wounds healed.

¶10. (SBU) The Senator declined an opportunity to clear this cable.